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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

MR. WELLS AND JOB ¹

By LAWRENCE GILMAN

MR. WELLS' latest attempt to make God respectable is an odd blend of the method of burlesque extravaganza and the method of spiritual allegory. Though we dare say that if one set out to produce a contemporary version of the Book of Job, one would probably, if one could, go at it in the way that has appealed to Mr. Wells. Doubtless one would hit upon the expedient of modernizing Job of the land of Uz as "Job Huss;" doubtless Bildad the Shuhite (a name, to be sure, worthy of a custard comedy) would become "Mr. William Dad, maker of the Showite car de luxe"; Zophar would become "Mr. Joseph Farr"; Eliphaz the Temanite would emerge as "Sir Eliphaz Burrows, manufacturer of the famous Temanite building-blocks"; and Elihu, the son of Barachel, would become "Dr. Elihu Barrack." If all this seems a bit heavy-handed, a bit lacking in subtlety, it should be remembered that neither imaginative finesse nor deftness of implication are among the gifts showered so generously by the Muses upon Mr. Wells. It is as absurd to look for these things in Mr. Wells as to look for the style of Arthur Symons in the *Congressional Record*, or to expect a hippopotamus to tread delicately among buttercups. Mr. Wells, of course, is no intellectual hippopotamus, nor is he in the remotest degree like the *Congressional Record*; we are merely illustrating the folly of blaming a man because he lacks traits that would be ludicrously dissonant with his makeup, if, conceivably, he possessed them.

Mr. Wells, to tell the bitter truth at once, lacks taste. He may not exhibit all the essential traits of genius, but in one respect he resembles the Olympians: like Shake-

¹ *The Undying Fire*, by H. G. Wells. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1919.

speare, Whitman, Mark Twain, and other rude leviathans, he is constantly perpetrating errors of discretion, gaucheries of humor, rough satires, exuberances of imagination, that any Literary Editor could set right for him between the puffs of a pipe. This is one of the reasons why Mr. Wells is not popular nowadays among the Best People. His crimes, indeed, are varied and manifold. He persists in talking about kindness and pity and love and faith and understanding and ideal justice as if these things were actually realities to be practised. Also, he is forever challenging Eternal Verities. And one hears upon every hand plaintive protests against his incurable habit of Thinking about Things. Drat the fellow!—why must he be forever Thinking? “After writing *The Research Magnificent*, *Mr. Britling*, *God the Invisible King*, *the Soul of a Bishop*, . . . and . . . his long story of an education called *Joan and Peter*,” remarked one of our most pungent critical ironists the other day, “Mr. Wells has apparently had some thoughts left over on the subjects of religion and education.” Mr. Wells should know better. What has a novelist to do with Thoughts?

And it is time Mr. Wells realized that people are becoming bored and restless through giving heed to his incessant talk about God. God was well enough in the days of *Mr. Britling*: then, of course, we needed God. In those dark days we needed him sorely—God and all his angels and the hosts of St. George. Mr. Wells’ intimacy with him, in the *Britling* days, was unspeakably heartening to us all, and God became almost as popular as Ian Hay. But Mr. Wells should realize that there is a time for all things,—everything in its place; and that religion and spiritual crusading and consecrations and sacred causes have become a little *vieux jeu*. A writer who would sell must feel the pulse of the reading public, and Mr. Wells’ fingers are becoming, it would appear, slightly insensitive. The War is over; the adversary bites the dust; Democracy is regnant and secure; a new world, bathed in peace, radiant with the beauty of holiness, emerges beneath the dawn. God is vindicated, and can now be returned to storage with the other protective furs of our winter of discontent. Yet here is the pestiferous Wells at it again—still talking about Divinity and spiritual valor, and offering us, above all things, a paraphrase of the Book of Job!

It is a version of the esteemed classic that is full of passionate melancholy and lamentation. Mr. Wells strikes hands here not only with Job, but with the author of Ecclesiastes. He is moved and shaken by the unutterable sadness of human life. He might say, in Pater's marvellous phrase, that he is unforgettably aware of "the great stream of human tears falling always through the shadows of the world." The *lacrymae rerum* obsess his imagination, and, with Whitman, he cries out upon the futility and wanton cruelty of existence—"this multifarious, mad chaos of fraud, frivolity, hoggishness: this revel of fools, and incredible make-believe and general unsettledness we call *the world*,"—with a seemingly heartless Master of the Revels tormenting the mundane ant-hill.

"To-day, gentlemen, as I sit here with you," says Job Huss, afflicted by disaster, bereavement, and suffering, to his three Comforters: William Dad and Sir Eliphaz and Joseph Farr—"as I sit here with you, I feel that life is a weak and inconsequent stirring amidst the dust of space and time, incapable of overcoming even its internal dissensions, doomed to phases of delusion, to irrational and undeserved punishments, to vain complainings and at last to extinction . . . I ask you, how is it possible for man to be other than a rebel in the face of such facts? How can he trust such a Maker? Why should we shut our eyes to things that stare us in the face? Either the world of life is the creation of a Being inspired by a malignancy at once filthy, petty, and enormous, or it displays a carelessness, an indifference, a disregard for justice, . . ." The voice of Mr. Huss faded out. But not for long. Job Huss, though ill of a cancer and about to undergo an operation, is as inveterate in speech as a Senator accomplishing a filibuster. And his talk is good—extraordinarily good. He is very moving, very eloquent, very terrible in this *J'Accuse!* that he flings in the teeth of the Cosmos. At the end, God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind of his anesthetic fantasies; and we are obliged to admit that the God of Mr. Wells' Job is a nobler deity than the God of the man of Uz.

Mr. Wells causes us again to wonder what answer the original story of Job is intended to give us concerning the relation between Man and God. What the biblical

Job's own answer is, so sensitive a student of philosophy and drama as Gilbert Murray confesses that he has "never quite made out." Are Job's last words correctly reported by the Authorized Version,—which makes him say: "Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes,"—or by the scholarly Mr. H. M. Kallen, who in his admirable and engrossing study of the Book of Job makes the protagonist say, "Wherefore I recant my challenge and am comforted amid dust and ashes"? Do you choose the A. V.'s translation, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him," or Mr. Kallen's: "I know that he will slay me, I have no hope"?

Mr. Kallen's interpretation of the fundamental thought of the Book of Job seems to Gilbert Murray¹ to postulate a conception of God as mere measureless Force, infinite and unknowable, to whom the righteous man and the unrighteous man are equally indifferent. Man, on the other hand, is the being which knows righteousness and therein finds his true life. "As one of the medieval Arab mystics expresses it, to say that God is 'righteous' is just as silly, and implies just as much anthropomorphism, as to say that He has a beard." For himself, Gilbert Murray believes the author of Job meant less (or more, as you please) than that: he meant that "God is absolute King, and it is mere impertinence to ask whether He is 'righteous' or not. It implies that the King's will is not the highest law—that there is some Law above God, and that His own creature has a claim upon Him . . . Man has no rights; God made him for God's own pleasure, and there is no more to be said . . . To raise the question that Job raises is mere blasphemy, to be thundered into silence. . . . No one doubts that God can do as he pleases; the whole question is whether He pleases to do justice or injustice."

Whatever you may think of Gilbert Murray's exegesis, there is no doubt that Job had small cause to revere God. Job the enquirer is bowled over contemptuously by Omnipotence. He is put in his place. Is he enlightened? No: he is sat upon. He has no rights, not even the right to protest. He is China; God is the Big Four. Then Job "abhors himself and repents." Not because his unsuspected sins have been revealed to him, but because

¹ *The Menorah Journal*, April, 1910.

he has been impious enough to question the justice of a potentate. He grovels in dust and ashes, no longer a free and indignant soul, but a worm. Only after he has been crushed and humiliated and taught to remember that he *is* a worm, does God appease him with sheep and camels and oxen and she-asses and sons and daughters "and an hundred and forty years."

The God of Mr. Wells' modern Book of Job is, we have said, a nobler conception than the petty, contemptuous, boastful, irascible tyrant who bullies the Old Testament Job. To *that* God we turn only for the magnificent poetry he could utter. The God who speaks to Mr. Wells' Job in his troubled dreams is a heartening and sustaining God. His answer to Job is the ancient and superb answer that the spirit of man can grow only through struggle. . . . "The darkness and ungraciousness, the evil and the cruelty, are no more than a challenge to you. . . . So long as your courage endures you will conquer. . . . On the courage in your heart all things depend." So speaks this nobler God.

That "undying fire" in the hearts of men—is it the flame of God? For Mr. Wells, it is; God, or else Prometheus the rebel. In either case, he is the master for whom Mr. Wells would have us live or die. If, "in the great frame of space and time," there is no God, no mercy, no human kindliness; "if life is a writhing torment, an itch upon one little planet, and the stars away there in the void no more than huge empty flares, signifying nothing," then all the brighter, for Mr. Wells, shines that inward flame. "All the more do I cling," he says, "to this fire of human tradition we have lit upon this little planet, if it is the one gleam of spirit in all the windy vastness of a dead and empty universe."

Will this bring solace to all troubled souls?—to those afflicted with a sense of the *idegno mistero delle cose*? We know not.

But we shall say that Mr. Wells has never written with such sustained power as in this impassioned book. Here are feeling, beauty, wit, ferocity, exaltation. If the mechanism of the allegory seems at times a little obtrusive—if you hear the creaking and clanking and smell the oil—it is of small importance. If the contrivance which serves Mr. Wells as a vehicle

seems both too rigid and too loose, it must be remembered that Mr. Wells is more interested in the burden of his discourse than in the form of its delivery. He is a prophet and an apostolic mystic, consumed with the urgency of the truths that have been revealed to him, passionately convinced of the world's imperative need to be set upon the path of illumination. And who shall say that any man who wisely and with anguish loves the human heart and detests its perversities may not have his chance to show it the way to wisdom and to peace?

LAWRENCE GILMAN.